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Keynote Address: Remarks at the Workshop on Tapping into the World of Electronic Legal Knowledge

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Remarks at the Workshop on Tapping Into The World of Electronic Legal Knowledge
(Cornell University October 8-October 11, 2007)

By

Muna Ndulo

I would like to join Claire Germain and Radu Popa in welcoming you all to this workshop on Tapping Into The World of Electronic Legal Knowledge. Many of you have come from far. I hope that you are enjoying Cornell. And the special weather that we have laid out for you. I am sure many people have told you how special this weather is at this time of the year.

I am sure throughout today you have had engaging discussions on many issues concerning electronic knowledge and research. I would like to make a few remarks based on my observations as a law teacher. The important role of information and communication technologies in teaching and research has now been well recognized. Information and communication are central to both law teaching and research. Law teachers and researchers need current materials to do their work effectively. Consequently, the implications of flexible, high capacity electronic storage, communications and exchange media for us both individually and institutionally are huge. Since these technologies know no boundaries they enable law teachers and researchers to expand their reach, and to play a role in the education of additional categories of students. More generally, they lead our institutions to a radical change in how we conceive of our student bodies, faculties and research possibilities. It has

increased increase access to materials in way we could never have imagined twenty years ago.

New information technologies present great opportunities in a number of ways (a). The major opportunity lies in the capabilities and capacities of the new information communication technology to better connect universities both to resources within their own country and elsewhere; (b) opportunity for scholars world wide to engage in research without the complexity of having to physically move to a country where information is located; and (c) the opportunity for scholars to contribute to their share to the global pool of knowledge through making their work available electronically.

The revolution in information technology has been particularly useful for scholars in developing countries. In many of these countries legal resources are extremely limited and students, teachers, judges and legal practitioners are inadequately equipped with one most basic legal information. Law books are expensive and become outdated quickly. Many scholars in developing countries can now access the large library collections, online data bases and electronic journals to stay current in their fields. Libraries in the developing world are not able to offer this wealth of research material. Information technologies have provided new mechanisms for delivering high quality, state of the art information to libraries all over the world making it possible for scholars to engage in research and improve the quality of their teaching.

Further electronic technology has made it easier for researchers to share information, communicate, and exchange knowledge with each other and with colleagues from all over the world. It has made it easier to share databases, publish web logs, and get prompt feeds back and reviews from peers. This access to new research tools and communication is already showing an impact on the substance and the quality of research.

In terms of teaching, we have via the internet broken through the barriers of geography and professional identity that limited a school's constituency to a small number of students. Long distance learning is not science fiction. It is now possible to conduct online teaching with students conducting online sessions, evaluate assignments. This has led to engaging debates on possible reforms in legal education. Some would argue that the pressures for dramatic change in the means of delivering legal education are large, for the potential gains are enormous. The overhead generated by the physical environment of higher education-the library facilities, classrooms, and student spaces of all kinds along with the staff involved in their operation-constitute a major part of the explicit cost of university -based legal education. The time and place requirements that limit the formal education process to students who are resident during a term and to groups of students able to assemble in scheduled meetings impose additional implicit costs on those students who are able to enroll. They also effectively exclude others from the education process. Digital distribution of course materials and networked communication linking faculty with students together with greater use of pre-programmed course contents has the potential for liberating legal education from many of

these costs and rigidities and breaking through the limits set by the faculty student ratios with which all schools operate.

In conclusion I would like to emphasize that in truth we have been riding an earthquake in the past decade. One that has transformed the way we do research and the way we teach. Electronic legal knowledge has made information increasingly accessible, cost effective and contributed both to the quality and volume of legal research.